

FILM REVIEWS

A ragging cure?

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***Hostel*. Produced by Matrix Medias and Mirchi Movies. Directed by Manish Gupta. Hindi, 112 minutes. 2010.**

Every year, several students across India attempt suicide or just drop out of college, unable to face the humiliation that goes by the name of ragging. Student hostels are citadels of such cruelty in many educational institutes in the country. Medical colleges are included in this list. In 2009, Aman Kachroo, a medical student in Himachal Pradesh, died after an assault by his seniors in the name of "ragging".

Films like *Munna Bhai*, *MBBS* and *3 Idiots* have touched on the menace of ragging but have given a humorous slant to these incidents, quite different from the standpoint in the current movie.

Hostel is the first Indian film looking exclusively at ragging. It depicts the physical and mental torture experienced by new students. This can include being paraded naked, starved, and sexually assaulted by their seniors. The depiction is close to reality; but the solution that the movie offers is disturbing and inappropriate.

Karan (Vatsal Seth), the central character, gets admission into an engineering college where he is tortured physically and mentally by his seniors. His classmates accept this as their destiny, but Karan does not.

Feroz (Mukesh Tiwari) is the leader of the gang of students involved in ragging their juniors in the hostel. He fails his examinations deliberately, so as to remain eligible for a post in the students' union. His plan is to enter mainstream politics eventually. When Karan resists Feroz's attacks, he is beaten up mercilessly. He tries to seek the help of the college authorities but nobody helps him; the warden of the hostel is hand in glove with Feroz. Karan befriends a college student, Payal (Tulip Joshi). One day when members of Feroz's gang humiliate Payal in front of Karan, he retaliates. Feroz warns Karan not to interfere with him and in return promises to keep away from him and Payal. But Karan cannot ignore the inhuman treatment

meted out to the next batch of juniors by Feroz's gang, which now includes his own batch mates. When one of these juniors commits suicide, after being raped by Feroz and others, Karan can contain himself no more, and shoots Feroz, his gang members, and the warden of the hostel, thus ending the reign of torture in the hostel.

The film also exposes the degeneration of our educational system in which campuses are ruled by local gangs, and college authorities turn a blind eye to everything, in order to maintain a 'reputation' and continue receiving donations. But does that justify the use of violence? Is it the take home message that frustrated students should pick up a gun and kill their torturers?

Hostel could have looked at the various options available to stop ragging, involving non-governmental organisations, parents, teachers, the media, the police and courts. It could have considered action that the authorities should take, such as imposing penalties on and suspending students involved in ragging, forming anti-ragging squads, raids by college authorities in hostels, particularly at night, campus security to stop goons entering the college, and so on. Karan could have used the Right to Information Act to ask what action the college authorities had taken against the culprits, and the college authorities could have been suspended for not taking action. There could have been a reference to the Supreme Court's directives on anti-ragging measures. There could have been mention of the all-India toll free number (1800-180-5522) for students in distress.

In sum, the film could have been a platform to create awareness amongst freshers across the country.

Manish Gupta makes a bold attempt to highlight an important but ignored problem in India through a mainstream movie on this topic. But the final solution suggested by the movie to curb ragging cannot be approved. The movie diagnoses the problem well, but the prescription has gone wrong.